



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

August 17, 2015

Region 4 Headquarters
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

DECISION NOTICE – SUN RIVER WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA HABITAT PROJECT

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVE CONSIDERED

Proposed Action:

On July 10, 2015, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) published an Environmental Assessment for a proposed habitat improvement project on the Sun River WMA. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, in cooperation with local USFS staff proposed to improve habitat conditions on big game (elk) winter range in the Sun River Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The proposed action would remove encroaching or competing Douglas fir trees from four proposed treatment units within the WMA. After tree felling, controlled broadcast burning or slash pile burning would be used to reduce surface fuel loads, create conditions suitable for aspen regeneration, and remove conifer seedlings and saplings. The treatment unit boundaries encompass a total of 465 acres; however total acreage to be actually treated would be less than this total given the target habitat types associated with this project. The proposed action is intended to improve native grass and forb production (forage) for wintering elk; improve productivity in aspen stands by removing competing conifers; improve forest health by selectively thinning Douglas fir stands impacted by insects, disease, and overcrowding; and minimize the threat of wildfire in the area by reducing fuels. Tree removal would be by hand. No new roads would be constructed. This is a non-commercial timber project.

No Action:

Implement no forest management activities and status quo forest management is maintained on the WMA. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would not conduct any habitat improvement projects on the Sun River WMA as outlined under this alternative. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would continue to manage the WMA for the benefit of wildlife and recreation activities. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would continue noxious weed management activities within the WMA.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PUBLIC PROCESS

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of the proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this

information. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks released a Draft EA for public review of the proposed action on July 10, 2015 and accepted public comment until 5:00 P. M. on August 10, 2015.

Notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published in the Great Falls Tribune and copies of the Draft EA were distributed to interested individuals, groups, and agencies to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. The Draft EA was available for public review on FWP's web site <http://fwp.mt.gov/> during the public comment period. An FWP public notice was issued July 10, 2015.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received a total of 5 written comments. A breakdown of the comments is as follows: 4 were in support of the proposed action and 1 was not in support of the proposed action. Below are the verbatim comments received for this project:

1. "I have read the Draft EA and support it. 100%."
2. "This looks like a productive and much-needed project. Periodic controlled burns in the future would help keep the Doug firs down prior to the need for cutting them next time."
3. "For years the sportsmen have been asking for this action it is good to see it finally happening. I have attended several of the scooping meetings and several people have volunteered to volunteer to help with the thinning, myself included. "have chain saw will travel" Volunteers need to be encouraged to participate. This is not FWP property, it is public property and the public needs the opportunity to participate in it's management."
4. "No new projects. I'm tired of the whining.....your budget is a wash... if it cost money out of FWP budget....NO...No...no"
5. "Improving the winter range for elk on the Sun River MWA by cutting encroaching conifers and burning sounds like a good idea."

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENT

The one public comment submitted that was not supportive of this project (comment #4 above) stated concerns over lack of funds within FWP budget's to conduct such a project. Funds used to pay for this project are derived from the Wildlife Division's Forestry Account. This account was established by the 2009 legislature and involves revenue generated from forest harvest activities on other WMAs that also benefit wildlife habitat, while achieving other forest management objectives. These funds are solely available for forestry projects on WMAs. Additionally, FWP intends to submit in the coming year grant application(s) to non-government organizations to help cover project costs.

Another comment (comment #3 above) mentioned the idea of utilizing volunteers to help conduct the tree felling portion of the project. While we understand and appreciate the notion, safety and liability concerns prohibit FWP from taking advantage of volunteers to cut down trees and assist with fire treatments. FWP will therefore rely on trained and experienced USFS staff to conduct this type of work. There may be some aspects of this project that volunteers can assist with, such as piling of fuels. Depending on circumstances and volunteer availability, FWP may consider this option and solicit help for lower risk components of the project. Volunteer work on WMAs requires signing a volunteer form, which assures affected parties are working in concert with FWP and volunteers benefit from liability coverage.

STIPULATION OF THIS RECORD OF DECISION DOCUMENT

None.


MODIFICATIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

No modifications to the EA are recommended.

DECISION

Utilizing the Environmental Analysis and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP that addresses the interests and issues identified for this proposed project. Fish, Wildlife & Park's analysis supports the Sun River WMA habitat project as proposed. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. **It is my decision to accept the draft EA as supplemented by this Decision Notice as final, and to recommend the implementation of the Sun River WMA habitat project.**

The Final EA may be obtained upon request from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Freezout Lake Office, Attn: Brent Lonner, PO Box 488, Fairfield, MT 59436, (406) 467-2488.



Gary Bertelotti
Region 4 Fish and Wildlife Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



Date